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SUBJECT: THE BERBER (AMAZIGH) IN MOROCCO, PART I

REF: A. RABAT 00040
[B](#). RABAT 00321
[C](#). RABAT 314

Classified By: Political Counselor Timothy Lenderking, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#). (C) SUMMARY: Poloff and PAO traveled from Rabat to Al-Akhawayn University, located in the foothills of the Middle Atlas mountain range, south to Erfoud in the anti-Atlas, west to Agdaz and north to Ouarzazate and through the High Atlas range to Marrakesh from March 10 through March 17 on a combined outreach and reporting trip. Prior to the trip Poloff met with members of the Berber (Amazigh) community in Rabat and discussed various aspects of their society and culture, while at the same time probing for political definitions. Throughout the trip the Amazigh populations in the anti-Atlas were clear about how they define themselves, what their priorities are, and how they view their circumstances. The population's participation in formal governmental structures, including political parties, was of interest, and, as might be expected, varied from sub-region to sub-region. This cable is an introduction to the Amazigh in Morocco and the recently completed trip. END SUMMARY.

The Amazigh: The Rabat View

[1](#)2. (SBU) The Berber or Amazigh (Comment: Amazigh is "Berber" in the local language. The population prefers to be called Amazigh. End Comment.) population of Morocco is not always separately identified. In fact, many Moroccans, including the royal family, claim Amazigh heritage. King Mohammed VI encourages the population to think of itself as one with a diverse heritage, including Berber, Arab, African, and European elements. At the same time, the constitution of Morocco supports this diversity and the understanding of a multi-religious society, that is Muslim, Jewish and Christian, with Islam as the official religion. Following the formation of Israel in 1948, large numbers of Amazigh Jews emigrated to Israel. Today, Israelis of Moroccan Amazigh Jewish descent continue to return to Morocco for festivals. In fact, the current leader of the Israeli labor party, A. Peretz, is originally from a village near Oujda and recently visited it (reftel C). To the casual observer, there are few if any tensions within the multi-cultural society.

[1](#)3. (SBU) In 2000, the new King (Note: Hassan II died in

¶1999. End Note.) began a series of trips through Morocco. One of these was to Ajdir, an agricultural village outside of the town of Khenifra, located southeast of Rabat in the Meknes-Tafilalt region. (Note: There are sixteen regions in the country. End Note.) In his Ajdir speech, the King announced the creation of the Royal Institute for Amazigh Culture (RIAC) and emphasized that there should be no confrontations between the Amazigh and the Arabs, who also reside in the region. He followed up on this speech with several initiatives: the creation of an Amazigh radio station, delivering of television news in Amazigh, and the support of movies and plays in the Amazigh language. At the same time, the Ministry of National Education and the RIAC wrote textbooks to be used in predominantly Amazigh speaking areas of the country. The RIAC also financially assists scholars who wish to preserve aspects of Amazigh culture.

¶4. (SBU) During the mid-1980s, after the Amazigh population of Algeria was put under some pressure by the GOA, an organization named "Tamaynout" was formed to promote Amazigh cultural activities throughout Morocco. The head of the organization today, Hassan Eid Belkacem, is an outspoken proponent of Amazigh activism. He supports a separate Amazigh identity in order to initiate political change and involvement (reftel A). According to Belkacem, forty to fifty percent of the Moroccan population is Amazigh, and he believes this fact should be recognized. Keeping children in school, in the view of Belkacem and other activists, directly relates to the use of the children's primary language, Amazigh. (Note: The issue of Amazigh education was consistently discussed during the trip. Varying attitudes were expressed. End Note.)

¶5. (C) In February, Poloff met with Abdelwahad Driouche, an Amazigh from Tinghir, a village located on the edge of the Atlas between Ouarzazate and Er Rachidia. Driouche works for the "external relations division" of the upper house of parliament and is an outspoken proponent of Amazigh rights and importance in Morocco. Driouche is of the opinion that control of the GOM and the economy of Morocco is in the hands of very few, and the Amazigh population is ignored. He advocates a realigning of the regions which would take into consideration Amazigh tribal considerations. During the meeting, Driouche was quick to point out differences between Amazigh and Arab tribal understandings. He, like other Amazighs, understands Arabs not inclusive and entrenched in traditional systems. Amazighs understand themselves as treating women better and having a more equitable tribal system because members of councils are elected, i.e., membership is not dependent on age. Driouche discussed Mohammed V's and Hassan II's attitudes towards Amazighs. In 1950, the Amazigh tribal rulers told Mohammed V that they would not be ignored once independence from France was granted. As a result, the King had the French free Amazigh prisoners in 1957. Under Hassan II there were revolts in 1973 and 1974 against the monarchy because the Amazigh desired greater independence -- eighty-two Amazigh were arrested; thirty-nine were put in prison. Overall, Driouche gave the impression that the past could not be forgotten and that the Amazigh should be treated better.

Setting the Stage for the Trip

¶6. (SBU) The east-west Atlas mountain range separates the southern part of eastern Morocco from the rapidly expanding great Sahara Desert. South of the Atlas mountains is the area known as the "anti-Atlas." While Amazigh historically were throughout modern Morocco, and stretched east to Libya and Egypt, the definition of Amazigh territory/ies is circumscribed today. (Note: Scholarly debates continue about the relationship between the Tuareg and the Berbers. Today, the people of the anti-Atlas readily claim a relation to Tuareg; however, this claim may solely be based on the desire to attract tourists. The traditional Tuareg blue scarf is worn by tourist service providers, sold in shops and brandished as the appropriate regional souvenir. When asked,

the local people easily say they are using the scarf for the tourists. End Note.) In Morocco, there are three main Amazigh areas: Soussi to the west with the city of Agadir as its center; Shlouh in the area of the Atlas mountains, both to the north and south; and, the Rif area around Tangiers.

¶7. (U) While north of the Atlas mountain range is exhibiting an abundance of flowers with rainfall exceeding expectations, the eastern section of the anti-Atlas, i.e., from Ait Sila east, continues to be in a drought. (Note: The six-year Moroccan drought has ended. In some areas, people are saying rainfall this year is the most in over twenty years. End Note.) The anti-Atlas area is part of two of the sixteen regions in Morocco: Sous-Massa, which corresponds to the area of the Soussi; and, Meknes-Tafilalt, which abuts the Rabat-Sale region in the north, extends through the middle Atlas and into the anti-Atlas. Over the mountains and in the anti-Atlas, Er Rachidia is the first town, and, the one to which the people of the eastern anti-Atlas look for assistance.

¶8. (U) The Meknes-Tafilalt (reftel B) region is the country of the Filali, who are Arabs from the Beni Hilal of the Hejaz. They arrived during the Arab-Muslim conquest of the area in the eighth century. Just south of Er Rachidia is an oasis area, "Meski," or "Source Bleue de Meski," which is the place identifier for the division between the Filali Arabs and the Amazigh to the south. The Amazigh, and the Arabs following the eighth century Arab-Muslim invasions, controlled the ancient trade routes in the Sahara, two of which culminated in Sijilmassa (one from the western section of the Sahara and one from the east), modern Rissani, south of the town of Erfoud.

¶9. (SBU) In June 2005, the King appointed Hassan Aourid as the new Wali of the Meknes-Tafilalt region. (Note: A "wali" is a "super-governor," is appointed by the King, and reports to the Minister of Interior. Governors are appointed to regions by the King as well, whereas a "caid" is appointed by the Ministry of the Interior. The number of caids in an area is dependent on the population.) Aourid was a classmate of the King's and was the palace spokesperson after the King came to power in 1999. Originally from Er Rachidia, Aourid heads an Amazigh "think tank" named Tarik Ibn Ziad and he was part of the steering committee which established the RIAC. Aourid's appointment was welcomed by the Amazigh in Meknes-Tafilalt.

¶10. (SBU) The difference between the Sous-Massa and Meknes-Tafilalt regions is obvious. While there is agriculture in the latter, it is far less impressive than that in the former. Part of this difference is due to the amount of rainfall, but, even more so to the economic base of Sous-Massa which is heavily dependent on tourism in Agadir and the surrounding vicinity. Aourid is increasing the revenues for Meknes-Tafilalt. Last year, the group Amazigh marriage festival in Rish, located near Er Rachidia, was made into an international event attracting a large number of visitors. This year he is organizing an international agricultural fair in Meknes to which farmers and international agricultural firms, including Israeli firms, will be invited. (Note: The revenues available to a region in Morocco are directly dependent on the population's own resources. End Note.)

Comment

¶11. (C) The "view from Rabat" is an important part of understanding the Amazigh in modern Morocco. It is not, however, the entire story, as was quickly learned on the trip to the anti-Atlas. Not unexpectedly, the capital's views vary in importance from place to place. In fact, tradition won in the mountainous, less accessible regions of the anti-Atlas around Agdaz, and bids to keep the Erfoud area alive with the tourism industry seemingly are winning. Amazigh identity has its own regional variations -- the Atlas

mountains divide the country, and, the history and geography with all of the environmental questions and variations play a role in how people establish their priorities and interact with the central government and its priorities.

Visit Embassy Rabat's Classified Website;
<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/nea/rabat>

Riley